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## **MacIntyre: Neo-Aristotelianism and Organization Theory**

**Ron Beadle and Geoff Moore <sup>1</sup>**

### **Introduction**

The inclusion of a work on Alasdair MacIntyre in this volume is appropriate not least because MacIntyre has always taken organizations seriously as objects of philosophical attention. How then can organizational analysis benefit from his work? To answer this question we make two distinct but mutually supporting cases. First that MacIntyre shows how organization theory need not draw relativist conclusions from hermeneutic premises and second that MacIntyre's 'goods-virtues-practices-institutions' framework overcomes the division between organization theory and organizational ethics.

We proceed in three parts. First we will contextualise MacIntyre's project in relation to a philosophical tradition whose impact upon organization theory is indubitable – hermeneutics. This case will involve a consideration of MacIntyre's use and transformation of hermeneutics through his conception of tradition. Second we will review MacIntyre's 'general theory' of goods, virtues, practices and institutions. This part will include a brief comparison with 'old' institutional theory (Selznick 1996, Stinchcombe 1997) and introduce the concept of "reasons for action". In the third part we will draw together these strands to demonstrate the difference between MacIntyrean organization analysis and an alternative hermeneutical / institutional approach through a worked example – Karl Weick and Karen Sutcliffe's analysis of the Bristol Royal Infirmary as a culture of entrapment (2003).

A conclusion will present a case for a research agenda for MacIntyrean empirics in organization studies.

### **Part One. Practices – Hermeneutic and MacIntyrean**

#### **1.1 MacIntyre in Context**

One way of locating Alasdair MacIntyre's philosophical project is in relation to the recovery of Aristotelian practical philosophy in the neo-Aristotelianism of the twentieth century. Whilst the incautious reader may see MacIntyre only in terms of his proximity to this movement, more can be learned if we attend also to his disputes with it. From Heidegger onwards neo-Aristotelian practical philosophy has influenced philosophical genres from literary criticism to political philosophy. It is a tradition which seeks to rescue Aristotelian texts both from what it sees as their errors, particularly their metaphysical *theoria* and from the later historicism through which Aristotle is seen through the lens of later philosophical figures or concepts (Knight 2007: 89).

In place of a universalising *theoria* of being is juxtaposed a philosophy of *praxis* in which it is the living activity of human beings that both creates and delimits human understanding. From such a premise Heidegger renders Aristotle as *the* philosopher of *praxis* and nothing else – for there is nothing else. Figures including Strauss, Arendt and Gadamer extend this reduction of the Aristotelian tradition to variants of practical philosophy whilst the unhappy relation of such projects to anything that can be reasonably labelled Aristotelian is a case

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made by Riedel's teleology in one way, and Ritter's institutionalism in another (Knight 2007: 92-3).

According to Knight such neo-Aristotelianism is inherently conservative whether in its hermeneutic or more explicitly political form, in three ways. Firstly its exclusion of *theoria* bounds all practical judgments in the ethos of the present – thus removing the basis for radical critique or action; secondly its institutionalism provides philosophical grounds for a permanent elite and thirdly its celebration of *praxis* involves a denigration of production (*ibid.* 100-101).

By contrast MacIntyre recovers both Aristotle's practical and theoretical philosophy through his notion of tradition, overcomes the division between *praxis* and production through his distinctive conception of practice and provides a critique of institutions qua institutions in his general theory of 'goods, virtues, practices and institutions'. MacIntyre thus rejects all three neo-Aristotelian positions whilst assimilating many of the insights of neo-Aristotelian hermeneutics.

The prudence of introducing the implications of Alasdair MacIntyre's work through its relationship to hermeneutics has already been argued (Smith 1999: 327) but if our summary of Knight's argument is accurate then this also accounts for its relationship with neo-Aristotelianism. This project is aided by the prodigious quantities of MacIntyre's work about and in conversation with hermeneutics. Having been producing philosophical material for over 55 years, MacIntyre has, since the 1981 publication of *After Virtue*,<sup>2</sup> developed an Aristotelian and subsequently Thomistic account of moral philosophy. His uniqueness in this endeavour is in his association of the Aristotelian and Thomistic traditions with Marxism.

This combination, described by Knight as "Revolutionary Aristotelianism" (Knight 2007) might have little chance of success given that the only thing that Marxists and Thomists can agree about is their mutual incompatibility. And yet MacIntyre remains one of the great figures of twentieth century moral philosophy, the subject of a veritable mini-industry of publications (Murphy 2003, D'Andrea 2007, Knight 2007, Blackledge & Davidson 2008), with an international academic society devoted to pursuing his project<sup>3</sup> and use of his work made across the social sciences.

## 1.2 The Self-Images of the Age. The Self-Images of Organization Theory

In Alfred Hitchcock's 1972 thriller 'Frenzy' the psychopathic leading character visits Duckworth's London Bookshop. The camera pauses over the window display of multitudinous copies of *Against the Self Images of the Age*, a collection of 1960s essays by Alasdair MacIntyre (1971). Legend has it that this shot was deliberate. MacIntyre's title for the collection reflects his ongoing concern with the intimacy of the relationship between agents' behaviour, self-understandings and the social structures they inhabit. In line with the hermeneutic tradition, he holds that it is an error, but an important error, to believe that the idioms and theoretical insights upon which our self-images depend, constitute a neutral representation of some external reality:<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> We will hereafter cite from the third edition published in 2007.

<sup>3</sup> The International Society for MacIntyrean Enquiry [www.macintyreanenquiry.org](http://www.macintyreanenquiry.org).

<sup>4</sup> For example, MacIntyre demonstrates how different idioms used by translators of Homer in the 16<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries transform its meaning before remarking that, "Each translator uses an idiom familiar in his own time, the presupposition of whose use is some contemporary well-articulated account of the determinants of action and of the corresponding psychology imputed to the agent" (MacIntyre 1988: 17).

“there is no way for the historian or social scientist to locate himself outside some tradition of interpretation, the very language he speaks and writes is so shaped by tradition that he cannot evade it.” (MacIntyre 1980: 177)

The narratives through which agents understand their lives are profoundly affected by the extent of their participation in and commitments to particular tradition-informed social practices, those which enable agents to answer such questions as ‘What are you doing?’ and ‘Why are you doing that?’. Intelligible answers to such questions are available only to those who share narrative traditions. MacIntyre’s definition is disarmingly simple:

“A living tradition ... is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition. Within a tradition the pursuit of goods extends through generations, sometimes through many generations. Hence the individual’s search for his or her good is generally and characteristically conducted within a context defined by those traditions of which the individual’s life is a part, and this is true both of those goods which are internal to practices and of the goods of a single life.” (MacIntyre 2007: 222)

How does this differ from the hermeneutic understanding of our boundedness by historically situated interpretations? The hermeneutic tradition maintains that

“Understanding can never really be grounded because it is itself the ground, the floor on which we are always already standing.” (Grondin 2003: 284)

For hermeneutics our inability to move beyond language dissolves the distinction between truth and rational justification. Hence for Gadamer we must “get away from objectivist naïveté and destroy the illusion of a truth that is separate from the standpoint of the one doing the understanding” (Gadamer 2001: 46) and for Habermas the limits of any radical intent involve the creation of spaces for ideal speech acts involving the recognition that we cannot move beyond speech to any notion of truth.<sup>5</sup>

In Organization Theory, leading authorities such as Burrell & Morgan (1979), Smircich (1983), Martin (1992) and many others offer us collections of paradigms distinguished by ontological and epistemological assumptions between the merits of which we may rationally offer no argument. The differences between paradigms are so fundamental as to entail mutual exclusivity (Burrell & Morgan 1979: 25) and thus the argument entails relativism. Even Tsoukas & Cummings’ (1997) sympathetic call for neo-Aristotelianism in organization studies shares this perspectivist-relativist position. Neo-Aristotelianism provides merely a “helpful” (672) turn in the project of thinking differently (676) about organizations, particularly those in which a certain type of phronetic work predominates (663-668). They recognise that their claims will have force only for those who share “the assumption that thinking *differently* is something that management theory takes to be important” (676, emphasis retained).

As to why this is important and why its helpfulness provides a reason for action, Tsoukas & Cummings can provide no answer. From a MacIntyrean perspective their reduction of neo-Aristotelianism to just another set of methods and foci for empirical research is intimately related to their inability to make a case for any method in terms of truth. Tsoukas & Cummings’ Foucauldian project misrepresents the nature of MacIntyre’s claims, not least of which are those that address the implications of Aristotelianism for truth and for its relationship to method. As Porter (2003: 46) notes, for MacIntyre, beyond the perspectivist and relativist positions “there is a third alternative, the possibility that the development of traditions, both internally and in relation to one another, can itself be considered to be a

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<sup>5</sup> See Breen (2007) for a MacIntyrean critique of Habermas in the context of work organization.

genuinely rational process that, if it goes well, moves in the direction of an ever fuller grasp of reality”.

So, for MacIntyre, arguments towards conclusions, such as those of Tsoukas & Cummings toward the conclusion that organization studies would benefit from a re-appropriation of neo-Aristotelianism, are intelligible only if arguments *as such* can be construed as better or worse, and this is intelligible only in the context of movement towards or away from some perfectable understanding (MacIntyre 1990b). Reames summarises MacIntyre’s position well:

“The metaphysical good norms all traditions, and hence in a sense one might want to say that it transcends traditions. But because the good would be perfectly understood in a perfected tradition, and because such a perfected tradition is already the *telos* of traditional rationality itself, there is no need to posit some sort of mysterious source of extra- or non-traditional rationality. In other words, what is required is a distinction between metaphysics and epistemology: the metaphysical good as such norms all traditions (and indeed all thought and action), but we can only think about the good and come to know it in and through traditions.” (Reames 1998: 443, emphasis retained)

For MacIntyre, unlike other realists,<sup>6</sup> the pragmatic refutation of relativism (i.e. what is the status of the claim that there is no truth?) is correct but insufficient in its neglect of the truths to which relativism itself points:

“relativism ... is one of those doctrines that have been refuted a number of times too often. Nothing is perhaps a surer sign that a doctrine embodies some not-to-be-neglected truth than that in the course of the history of philosophy it should have been refuted again and again. Genuinely refutable doctrines only need to be refuted once.” (MacIntyre 1987a: 385)

What are the truths to which relativism points? The first is the limits that our historic situatedness imposes on our claims to truth. MacIntyre agrees that we do not have the resources *a priori* to judge, for example, between such constructions as objectivity and subjectivity in their relation to ontology, but this does not entail that we *could never* so judge, and it is this latter error into which the perspectivism so prevalent in organization studies falls. In contrasting his own position to Gadamer’s, MacIntyre argues:

“to have become aware of the historically conditioned character of our philosophical enquiries and interpretations is not to have escaped from it. There is no standpoint outside history to which we can move, no way in which we can move to some presuppositionless stance, exempt from the historical situatedness of all thinking ... It is not incompatible, however, with a recognition of this truth to argue that a great deal turns on the nature of our awareness of the contingencies of our historical situatedness and that a certain kind of standpoint outside history, can transform our relationships to that history.” (MacIntyre 2002: 158)

If, as he argues in line with hermeneutics, agents’ understandings are constituted within traditions of language and practice, it is also true (and in this he departs from hermeneutics and from relativism) that we may distinguish intelligibly between claims made for truth within the traditions which shape language and practice over time. This effort enjoins us to engage in two distinct but related types of conflict:

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<sup>6</sup> Rand is one philosophical realist against whose Aristotelianism MacIntyre’s has been contrasted (Beadle 2008a).

“those with critics and enemies external to the tradition who reject all or at least key parts of those fundamental agreements, and those internal, interpretative debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress a tradition is constituted.” (MacIntyre 1988: 12)<sup>7</sup>

It is only if MacIntyre can show that conflicts of the former type are resolvable that we have grounds to reject the type of incommensurability that constitutes the self-image of so much contemporary organization theory. The challenges of this task are difficult to underestimate however. MacIntyre holds, alongside hermeneutics, that traditions are the bearers of the substantive rationalities on which intelligibility and judgment depend (MacIntyre 1987a, 1987b, 1987c, 1988). We cannot turn to a system of rationality through which to decide between the claims of traditions because rational justification is itself tradition-constituted. We can only claim that we have reason to believe in quarks, for example, by seeing how the argument for their existence has gone so far and judging the evidential and theoretical claims made in their favour against those standards by which we judge such claims, standards that themselves have a history against which to judge whether they are the best standards against which so to judge. The intelligibility of our claims is also such that what is intelligible at an earlier point in a tradition may become unintelligible – the tradition may suffer an “epistemological crisis” (Porter 2003: 47) – or at least bear a significantly different meaning later on (MacIntyre 1986: 76):

“For an individual either to be or to appear to be rational is then for that individual to participate in the norm-governed transactions and relationships of a particular institutionalised social order. Hence ‘rational’ is not a predicate to be applied to individuals qua individuals but only to individuals qua participants in particular social orders embodying particular conceptions of rationality.” (MacIntyre 1987b: 4)

The intimate relationship between intelligibility in everyday exchange and adherence to some tradition of judgment and enquiry is no small point.<sup>8</sup> Not to be understood is a form of social death which befalls those who step outside some tradition of rationality or whose social circumstances bring them into the milieu of an alien tradition. MacIntyre maintains that it is only the ability of one tradition to provide better understandings of those conflicts and failings of other traditions than they can provide for themselves that enables us to judge (by historically established traditional standards) its rational superiority (MacIntyre 1988). This can happen only through learning the language and rationality of the other tradition against which one aims to make one’s claims. As Porter comments, “We might say that, on MacIntyre’s view, the necessity for standing outside of any tradition whatever is obviated by the possibility of standing within two traditions at once in order to move between them in a comparative assessment of their claims” (2003: 53). Without such a “second first language” (MacIntyre 1988: 370-388, 403) the prosecution of such an argument is as fruitless as relativists hold – but theirs too is not a position from nowhere.

This argument can barely be made in such abstract terms as we have used and in and of itself will convince no-one. We require instead narratives which demonstrate the ways in which encounters between traditions turn out. For this reason MacIntyre constructs precisely such narratives (1967, 1988, 1990a, 2007) and in his intellectual biography of Edith Stein

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<sup>7</sup> MacIntyre has attested (2006: viii) to his debt to Kuhn’s notion of scientific paradigms for the development of this conception. However the use to which Kuhn’s notion has been put in social science, as a motif for criterionless choice, is to be rejected.

<sup>8</sup> In answer to a question at the Second International Conference of MacIntyrean Enquiry at St Meinrad, Indiana in 2008, the theologian and sometime collaborator of MacIntyre’s, Stanley Hauerwas argued that the best argument against relativism was ‘Try living it’. The different traditions of substantive rationality to which relativists must point to make their arguments are always themselves universalizing traditions (MacIntyre 1987b: 18).

(2004a) recounts the conversions of Stein and a number of her phenomenological associates (Reinach, Rosenzweig and Lukács).

Conversions require those who undertake them to understand at least two traditions (despite sometimes more and less permeable and precarious boundaries between them) and the always open possibility that they might be brought together in the foundational acts and testaments of some new tradition. Examples include (supremely for MacIntyre), Aquinas's creative combination of Christian doctrine and Aristotelian teleology and MacIntyre's own creative assimilation of both the Marxist analysis of capitalist society and the historic and hermeneutic turn in philosophy within Thomism. MacIntyre suggested in his contribution to the Festschrift for Gadamer's 100<sup>th</sup> Birthday that "modern Thomism only exhibited an awareness of the historical and hermeneutic turn in philosophy relatively late in its history" (MacIntyre 2002: 157). The modern Thomist whose life work has best exhibited this turn, is MacIntyre himself. As Lutz (2004: 28-29) argues, MacIntyre's own history of creative engagement with traditions itself constitutes an argument for such engagement.

Let us summarise the case we have made so far. Against what Knight (forthcoming) terms the conservative phenomenology of practices maintained by hermeneutics which claims that:

"philosophy is a human experience that remains the same and that characterises the human being as such, and that there is no progress in it, but only participation"  
(Gadamer trans. Smith 1986: 6)

and against its adherents in organization theory, stands MacIntyre's progressive notion of practices and the traditions which co-constitute them. These include but are not limited to philosophical traditions which provide us with the schemes of rational justification which enable us to move towards truth. These traditions can attempt to demonstrate their rational superiority over their rivals, however, only if they are capable of maintaining dialogue with them such that learning might result (MacIntyre 1988: 388; 2002: 166) in the same way that an agent can learn only by being accountable, thereby "rendering him or herself vulnerable to dialectical refutation" (MacIntyre 1990a: 200).

### 1.3. Implications for Research Methods

If the foregoing argument is well founded we should not be surprised to learn that a set of philosophical commitments unite MacIntyrean and hermeneutic attitudes towards research methods. The intimacy between social structures, social roles (particularly when conceived as distinctive characters)<sup>9</sup> and the tradition-constituted framework through which notions as fundamental as agency and context are understood provides distinctive boundaries around the conduct of research. McMylor summarises this well:

"The key to MacIntyre's argument, for the sociologist in particular, lies in the view that there is no such thing as 'behaviour' that can be identified independently of intentions, beliefs and settings." (McMylor 2009:4)

In Chapters 6 – 8 of *After Virtue* MacIntyre argues from this position to critique both the idea of social *science* and the bureaucratic rationality whose claims it attempts to legitimize.<sup>10</sup> However this is liable to cause some confusion in readers, as Higgins observes:

"It may be MacIntyre's special distinction to strike half of his readers as an old fashioned universalizing metaphysician (since he defends a version of tradition and teleology) while striking the other half as a dangerous relativist." (Higgins 2004: 35)

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<sup>9</sup> See MacIntyre (2007: 28-29).

<sup>10</sup> The argument has a long pedigree in his work – see MacIntyre (1973) for example.

Such readings err by maintaining conventional usage of both terminology and the constructs through which elements of that terminology (e.g. 'tradition' and 'relativism') are to be inter-related. For MacIntyre however tradition is an evolving set of debates and relativism is (among other things) a falsely derived epistemological conclusion from empirical observations. Nevertheless methodological limits are incontestable from what has remained almost unchanged in MacIntyre's writings on epistemology and the conduct of enquiry<sup>11</sup> and these point to the centrality of considerations of intelligibility, narrative, social structure and agency. In earlier collaborative work one of us described these limits in terms of a series of systematic exclusions (Coe & Beadle 2008: 10):

- enquiries which do not relate themselves (including the possibility of critically relating themselves) to a tradition-constituted community of enquiry
- enquiries seeking to create law-like generalisations through the testing of hypotheses about causation through measurement of a defined list of variables<sup>12</sup>
- enquiries which do not report their findings in a narrative form
- enquiries which exclude agents' self-understandings in attempting to account for their behaviour
- enquiries which exclude *either* features of institutions (structure) *or* the agency of subjects in their explanations
- enquiries which do not recognise the ineliminable presence of the enquirers' judgments in the accounts they present.

The success of our enquiries depends upon our ability to account for the limits imposed by both social structure and the self-understandings which social structures characteristically exhibit. Ruling out only "positivist conceptions of observability and verifiability" (MacIntyre (2004b: 6) whilst encouraging other forms of empirical research offers a wide range of choice for researchers in the MacIntyrean tradition. Both primary and secondary work is allowable, participant and non-participant observation, and even the presumption against positivist hypothesis testing does not preclude quantitative work as such.

When we consider the empirical work that has specifically cited MacIntyre as its inspiration an emphasis on 'thick descriptions' created through narrative is evident. These include Smith (1999), Dunne (1993) and Erben (2000) in education studies, Williams' (1984) biographical narratives with the chronically sick, Coe's biographical narratives exploring conflicts between goods at a major music venue (Coe & Beadle 2008), Crockett's (2008) structured interviews with entrepreneurs, Finchett-Maddock's (2008) ethnography of squatting, Salter's (2008) ethnography of alternative media, Nicholas's (2008) auto-ethnographic reflections Eucharistic ceremonies and Dungeons and Dragons, Beadle's (2003) circus auto-ethnography and follow-up story-telling narrative (Beadle & Könyöt 2006, Beadle forthcoming), Moore's (2009a) use of Crockett's framework in his study of Alliance Boots and his study of churches as organizations (2009b), Beabout's (2008) work on management in monasteries, Dawson's (2009) master-narratives of British healthcare and Martin's (2009) narratives of organizational identity.

Some of this work promises empirical applications of a distinctively MacIntyrean organization theory. How would such a theory work and what does it offer organization studies? In Part Two we consider MacIntyre's 'general theory' of goods, virtues, practices and institutions and consider briefly its relationship with 'old' institutionalism. In Part Three we will illustrate this

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<sup>11</sup> See especially Turner (2003), D'Andrea (2007: 165-197) MacIntyre (1973, 1979b, 1990c, 2004b [1958]: 1-38).

<sup>12</sup> MacIntyre does not rule out hypothesis testing as such but the results of such testing fall into the general limits that social enquiry must understand itself as working within, such that their results must take the form of "characteristically and for the most part ..." (MacIntyre 2004b: 14).



discussion with a worked example to show the impact of a distinctively MacIntyrean reading of a case study which exemplifies hermeneutic work in organization studies.

## Part Two. MacIntyrean Organization Theory

### 2.1 Goods, virtues, practices and institutions

Having shown what demonstrable victories and defeats constitute for traditions and the importance of these encounters for a defensible account of rational justification we now move to outline the tradition which MacIntyre claims to have demonstrated superiority through engagement with its rivals, that of the virtues (2007). In *After Virtue* MacIntyre provides his definitive account of their essential features - goods, virtues, practices and institutions.<sup>13</sup>

We began the first part of this paper by distinguishing between the hermeneutic and MacIntyrean understandings of practice. In this part we begin again with practice, for it is in the relationship between our participation in social practices and the discovery of our good, but also in the essential institutionalising of such practices, that MacIntyre's potential contribution to organization theory lies.

For MacIntyre a practice is:

“Any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.” (MacIntyre 2007: 187)

Four central concepts inhere in this definition. First, practices are social and co-operative activities. Second, the outcome of engagement in practices is the achievement of internal goods. MacIntyre later identifies internal goods with both the excellence of the products that result from the practice, such as “the excellence in performance by the painters and that of each portrait itself” (MacIntyre 2007: 189), and the perfection of the individuals in the process of such production (MacIntyre 1994: 284). Third, these standards of excellence have “been determined by the historical community of practitioners” (Kallenberg 2003: 21) – “practices always have histories” (MacIntyre 2007: 221). So, fourth, practices are systematically extended (are “transmitted and reshaped” (*ibid.*: 221)) through traditions comprising the successive rounds of internal conflict about, amongst other things, its own standards of excellence.

Practices are widespread, indeed it could be argued that we spend much of our lives in them, since they include *inter alia* “arts, sciences, games, politics in the Aristotelian sense, the making and sustaining of family life” (MacIntyre 2007: 188). The virtues find their essential place in this schema because their deployment is the *sine qua non* for the achievement of the goods internal to practices:

“A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.” (MacIntyre 2007: 191)

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<sup>13</sup> This account is supplemented but not amended in later work which clarifies its inherent metaphysics (MacIntyre 1999a, 2008c).

Goods internal to practices include not only the generation and delivery of genuinely excellent products or services, but also the deployment of the virtues themselves – first to attain these goods and later, as desires are transformed, the exercise of the virtues becomes constitutive of the agent's own good; the virtues thus become both means and ends and hence undermine that distinction. When developed in this way, virtues that find their initial constitution within practices find wider and wider applications within agents' lives considered as a whole such that their self-image becomes a narrative quest for the good.

Goods internal to practices, however, are not the only kind of goods and MacIntyre contrasts them with goods external to particular practices such as status, money and power. When achieved these are “always some individual's property and possession. [They are] characteristically objects of competition in which there must be losers as well as winners” (MacIntyre 2007: 190). With internal goods, however, although there is competition in one sense, this is competition to excel and so benefits all members of the community engaged in the practice (*ibid.*: 190-191).

In order for internal goods to be realised it is clear that practices need to flourish. To do so, however, they require institutions. And institutions are:

“characteristically and necessarily concerned with ... external goods. They are involved in acquiring money and other material goods; they are structured in terms of power and status, and they distribute money, power and status as rewards. Nor could they do otherwise if they are to sustain not only themselves, but also the practices of which they are the bearers. For no practices can survive for any length of time unsustained by institutions. Indeed so intimate is the relationship of practices to institutions – and consequently of the goods external to the goods internal to the practices in question – that institutions and practices characteristically form a single causal order in which the ideals and the creativity of the practice are always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of the institution, in which the cooperative care for common goods of the practice is always vulnerable to the competitiveness of the institution. In this context the essential feature of the virtues is clear. Without them, without justice, courage and truthfulness, practices could not resist the corrupting power of institutions.” (MacIntyre 2007: 194)

MacIntyre's description of institutions and their relationship with practices can be applied in almost any context, including those to which MacIntyre refers generically as “productive crafts” (MacIntyre 1994: 284). The particular practice may be fishing, or producing beef or milk, or architecture, or it may be, as we shall discuss below, providing services such as medicine. The common feature, however, is that all such activities fall within MacIntyre's definition of a practice as “any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity”. But all such practices are institutionalised and MacIntyre provides both a warning and some exemplification as follows: “Practices must not be confused with institutions. Chess, physics and medicine are practices; chess clubs, laboratories, universities and hospitals are institutions” (MacIntyre 2007: 194). A key point for organization studies, then, emerges – that, whatever the mode of institutionalization (a point we will return to below), any organization may be re-described as a practice-institution combination.<sup>14</sup>

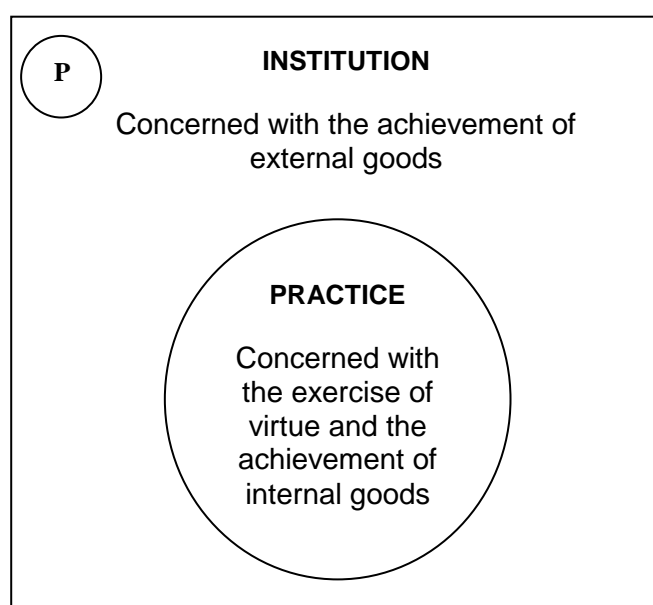
But this leads us to another important point in MacIntyre's framework:

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<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting here that drawing this equivalence between organizations and practice-institution combinations does not preclude non-organizational examples of practices being institutionalised. The making and sustaining of family life (one of MacIntyre's example practices) is institutionalised through arrangements such as marriage (often referred to as an institution of course), taxation and other fiscal allowances, and cultural mores which support it, without it being in any sense an organization.

“the making and sustaining of forms of human community – *and therefore of institutions* – itself has all the characteristics of a practice, and moreover of a practice which stands in a peculiarly close relationship to the exercise of the virtues ...” (MacIntyre 2007: 194, emphasis added).

In other words, there is a second practice in any organization which is the practice of making and sustaining the institution. And hence those who have, in one sense, outgrown the core practice and now represent the institution that houses it, also have the same opportunity to exercise the virtues through engaging with that second practice.<sup>15</sup> Figure 1 below represents an organization as a core practice situated within an institutional framework in which the smaller circle labelled “P” is the practice of making and sustaining the institution.<sup>16</sup>



**Figure 1. An organization represented as a practice-institution combination together with the secondary practice of the making and sustaining of the institution**

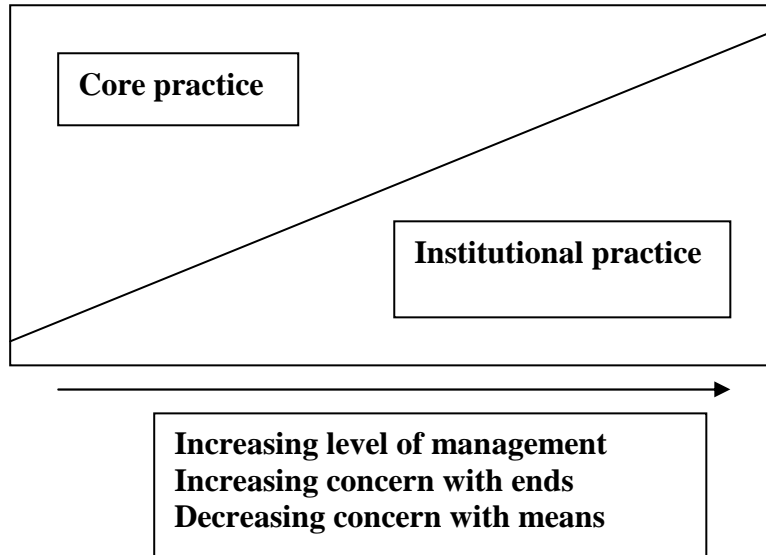
Both the practice at the core of the practice-institution combination and the practice of making and sustaining the institution that houses it have to be managed.<sup>17</sup> Figure 2 (based upon Moore 2008) shows managerial engagement with both. Managers’ participation in the core practice declines with progression in organizational hierarchies, a distancing which

<sup>15</sup> MacIntyre’s condemnation of the character of the distinctively *modern* and hence emotivist manager (2007: 25-29) has been widely discussed (Anthony 1986, Mangham 1995, Brewer 1997, Beadle 2002, Moore 2008) but less attention has been paid to the argument that decision-making in practice-institution combinations requires management of a specific kind.

<sup>16</sup> It is quite likely that many institutions will house more than one practice. Universities as institutions, for example, house parts of many practices in all the different subject areas which are represented. It is also possible for practices to extend beyond particular organizations so that the organization houses only a part of the practice – the practices of physics and medicine, for example, are housed only partly inside universities. For simplicity, however, we assume here a single practice within any particular institution.

<sup>17</sup> A similar point arose in debates over both business (Beadle 2008b) and teaching with MacIntyre’s argument that teaching is “not a practice, but a set of skills and habits put to the service of a variety of practices. The teacher should think of her or himself as a mathematician, a reader of poetry, an historian or whatever, engaged in communicating craft and knowledge to apprentices” (MacIntyre and Dunne 2002: 5). See also Dunne & Hogan (2004) for a series of rejoinders.

potentially undermines both their achievement of the internal goods of the core practice and the relative attention such goods receive within decision-making. The compensating factor for managers, however, is their engagement with the practice of making and sustaining the institution from which they may, through the exercise of appropriate virtues, gain the internal goods thereby available.



**Figure 2. The relationship of different levels of management with the core practice**

#### *The virtuous organization*

Following this, we can identify various features of a virtuous organization and, associated with this, the responsibilities particularly of senior management for ensuring that these features exist and are nurtured. The first requirement of a virtuous organization, in conformity with Aristotelian *teleology*, would be that there is a *good purpose* for the particular practice-institution combination that it comprises. Second, the institution would be aware that it is founded on and has as its most important function *the sustenance of the particular practice that it houses* and following from this the organization would *encourage the pursuit of excellence in that practice* whatever that may mean for the particular practice in question. Third, it would focus on *external goods* (such as survival, power, profit, reputation or success) as both a necessary and worthwhile function of the organization, but *only to the extent necessary to the sustenance and development of the practice*.

Which particular virtues would characterize virtuous organizations? Although we might consider a wider list it is clear that justice, courage and truthfulness (MacIntyre 2007: 194, cited above) are the *sine qua non* of MacIntyre's schema, together with the virtues of integrity and constancy (MacIntyre 1999b: 317-318) which refer to their consistent application across practices and over time.

The virtuous organization would require courage in order to resist the corrupting power of institutions with which it relates and to minimize the effects of the environment on its character where these might be damaging.<sup>18</sup> It would require justice in order to distribute external goods appropriately, to weigh its own advantage with that of the wider community, to foster its own excellence through (for example) an allocation of roles that ensures that those

<sup>18</sup> It must therefore resist the very processes of environmental influence to which new institutional theory points.

who are truly best at particular tasks are appointed to do them, and to generate internal harmony through ensuring that subordinates accept the justice of their place (Klein 1988: 60). Solomon's (1992) emphasis on trust (by which we should infer the virtue of both offering trust to others and being trustworthy oneself) contains within its definition the necessity of truthfulness for organizational conduct.

Such virtues would find their institutional embodiment in a number of features (Moore 2005b). These are the development of a *power-balanced structure* that would ensure that the views and desires of particular constituencies are not privileged over those of others, and decision-making *systems and processes* that enable rational critical dialogue to have the effect of countering biases and enabling the questioning of the hitherto unquestioned (MacIntyre 1999b: 313). While to some extent outside of its control, the encouragement of a supportive *culture* will also be a feature of the character of a virtuous organization.<sup>19</sup>

For our purposes here more needs to be said about two of these requirements of the virtuous organization. In relation to *purpose* MacIntyre is clear, as we noted above, that the virtues enable the achievement of a person's *telos of eudaimonia* (2007: 148) at the individual level. But this *telos* always needs to be re-evaluated (2007: 218-9) because it is only partially known – and hence what MacIntyre calls a *narrative quest* (a storied exploration) is involved (MacIntyre says that “the good life for man [*sic*] is the life spent in seeking for the good life for man, and the virtues necessary for the seeking are those which will enable us to understand what more and what else the good life for man is” (MacIntyre 2007: 219)). This narrative quest is necessarily communal and historically extended, a point made well by McCann & Brownsberger:

“... the normative character of MacIntyre's definition of a social practice ... is secured within a larger account of the moral life as a whole. There must be some *telos* to human life, a vision anticipating the moral unity of life, given in the form of a narrative history that has meaning within a particular community's traditions; otherwise the various internal goods generated by the range of social practices will remain disordered and potentially subversive of one another. Without a community's shared sense of *telos*, there will be no way of signifying ‘the overriding good’ by which various internal goods may be ranked and evaluated.” (McCann & Brownsberger, 1990: 227-28)

Translating this to the organizational level, we are left with an empirical question in judging the goodness of purpose of a particular organization. And the goodness of purpose is the extent to which the internal goods of the practice at the core of the organization contribute to the overriding good of the community *and* the extent to which there is a continuing debate within the organization as to what the community's good is and how goods internal to practices contribute to it.

The second requirement that we need to explore further here is the inter-relationship between internal and external goods. MacIntyre makes the point that we must rank such that goods internal to practices (goods that are valued for their own sake) should be prioritised. External goods should be valued only in so far as they enable the achievement of internal goods (MacIntyre 1988: 35). But this does not mean that external goods are *not* goods (MacIntyre 2007: 196).

This also leaves us with an empirical question as to the extent to which an organization prioritises between the practice and the institution or, in other words, prioritises between internal and external goods. But we should note that the virtuous organization is *not* one

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<sup>19</sup> See Moore (2005b) for more on the distinction and relationship between organizational culture and character.

which prioritises internal goods to the exclusion of external goods, but one that maintains an appropriate *balance* between them.

### *Preconditions for virtuous organizations*

In previous work (Moore & Beadle 2006), we have identified three preconditions for such virtuous organizations. Space precludes a detailed consideration of these here, but in summary they are as follows. The first precondition is the presence of virtuous agents at the level of both the practice and the institution, for without agents who possess and exercise the virtues the practice itself would no longer be fostered internally through the pursuit of excellence, and at the institutional level the corruption of the institution and the consequent distortion of the practice would seem to be inevitable. This is particularly the case for those agents who hold decision-making authority in the institution. But the presence of such agents at both practice and institutional (managerial) level is clearly insufficient to guarantee the presence of organizational virtue.

The second precondition for a virtuous organization is the mode of institutionalization which distributes both decision-making authority and decision criteria within institutions. It is clear that the same practice may be institutionalized in different forms and MacIntyre notes that, “practices are often distorted by their modes of institutionalization, when irrelevant considerations relating to money, power and status are allowed to invade the practice” (MacIntyre 1994: 289). In other words, we would expect that different institutional forms will support to different extents (and possibly even exclude, though see further below) the practices which they house.

The third precondition for a virtuous organization relates to the environment in which it is situated. It is clear that MacIntyre regards organizations as open systems that are both affected by other organizations and able (in both positive and negative ways) to compartmentalise themselves from them. It is apparent therefore that a particularly significant factor in any organization’s ability to maintain and exercise the virtues is the extent to which the environment is more or less conducive to the practice it houses. MacIntyre warns: “We should therefore expect that, if in a particular society the pursuit of external goods were to become dominant, the concept of the virtues might suffer first attrition and then perhaps something near total effacement, although simulacra might abound” (MacIntyre 2007: 196). Hence, we would expect that an unconducive environment, and in particular one that was focused to too great an extent on external goods, would threaten organizational virtue.

Empirical questions also arise from this discussion of the three preconditions for organizational virtue, for example: the extent to which one or another precondition predominates, whether strength in one can offset weakness in another, and the extent to which the preconditions are mutually reinforcing.

## **2.2 MacIntyrean and Institutional Theory, and Reasons for Action**

The ‘goods – virtues – practices – institutions’ framework points to two central and symbiotically related tensions inhering in organizational life: those between practices and institutions; and those between the pursuit of goods internal to practices and the pursuit of external goods. The common goods of the practice cannot survive for any length of time unsustained by successful institutional pursuit of external goods, but practices are also and always vulnerable to the competitiveness and acquisitiveness of the institution which houses them.

In capitalist business organizations institutionalized in the Anglo-American mode MacIntyre has argued that such vulnerability is endemic, to the extent that the institution has, in effect, 'won' over the practice – its justification is the pursuit of external goods – such that “much modern industrial productive and service work is organised so as to exclude the features distinctive of a practice”, and in such a way that this type of activity is “at once alien and antagonistic to practices” (MacIntyre 1994: 286).

Despite this, however, the counter argument has been made (Moore 2005b) that *all* business activities, irrespective of their form of institutionalisation, must contain the vestiges of a practice and the virtues to some degree, for if they did not – that is, if the institution had 'won' so completely that the virtues had suffered “something near total effacement” (MacIntyre 2007: 196, cited above) – then the institution would have, in effect, killed itself from the inside by failing to sustain the practice on which it itself is founded. In other words, while in Anglo-American capitalist forms of business organization the practice may be potentially and continually under threat from the acquisitiveness and competitiveness of the corporation, it still exists.<sup>20</sup> This counter argument, of course, suggests that MacIntyre is overly pessimistic in his assessment.

Similarly, Keat (2008b) has argued that in other forms of capitalism, notably in 'coordinated' market economies such as Germany and Japan, industrial organization is such as “to be highly conducive to the internal goods and standards of excellence central to MacIntyrean practices” (*ibid.*: 77). And Moore (2002) notes that it may be necessary for institutions to observe and take corrective action when the practices that they house become so introverted and self-satisfied that they no longer set out to achieve “those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity” – as we shall see in Part Three.

Hence, in a variety of forms the essential and unavoidable tension between practices and institutions persists and plays out as a similar drama. MacIntyre highlights the tension as follows:

“the ability of a practice to retain its integrity will depend on the way in which the virtues can be and are exercised in sustaining the institutional forms which are the social bearers of the practice. The integrity of a practice causally requires the exercise of the virtues by at least some of the individuals who embody it in their activities; and conversely the corruption of institutions is always in part at least an effect of the vices.” (MacIntyre 2007: 195)

The tensions between practices and institutions are evidenced in a wide range of organization theory with 'old' institutional theory (a distinction from 'new' institutionalism outlined in Selznick 1996) demonstrating particular sensitivity both to its features and to its own value commitments in ways which appear to us to be particularly resonant of MacIntyre's framework.<sup>21</sup> Selznick's summary is especially revealing in this regard. The aim of the 'old institutional theory' is nothing less than:

“the quest for more effective and humane cooperative systems, including better ways of delegating responsibility and insuring accountability” (Selznick 1996: 276).

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<sup>20</sup> For a somewhat polemical argument that even Anglo-American capitalism need not be antithetical to the pursuit of internal goods through practices, see Dobson (2009).

<sup>21</sup> There is a keen debate as to whether institutional theory is itself hermeneutic. Both Stott (1987) and Jennings & Greenwood (2003: 199) offer evidence for the hermeneutic roots of institutional theory though both Lok & Willmott (2006) and Weick (2003) are heavily critical of new institutional theory's neglect of language and interpretation. Nevertheless we cite Weick and Sutcliffe's (2003) use of Salancik and Pfeffer's (1978) institutional account of “behavioural commitment” in Part Three below.

Stinchcombe (1997: 17) similarly argues that “the trouble with the new institutionalism is that it does not have the guts of institutions in it. The guts of institutions is that somebody really cares to hold the organization to the standards and is often paid to do just that”.<sup>22</sup> It is in and through organizations so conceived that practitioners, possessing and exercising the virtues within the core practice (and, for managers, within the institutional practice), realise the internal goods available and so are enabled on their narrative quest towards their true *telos*. These are organizations, as Stinchcombe puts it, with guts.

Mapping the terminology of the old institutionalism onto MacIntyrean categories is problematic (a reading of Selznick 1992, particularly Part 3, is instructive in this respect) but it is clear that they share similar concerns. MacIntyre’s use of the term institution is not identical with either old or new institutional theory,<sup>23</sup> because his identification of the practices-institution nexus offers a new way of conceptualising organizations (and, indeed, practice-institution combinations more generally). In identifying the embeddedness of social relations in practices, in defining the essential relationship between practices and virtues and in identifying institutionalisation as one more practice, MacIntyre opens up organizations as *essentially* moral spaces – locations of moral action by moral agents operating both individually and collectively. This identification offers to the ‘old’ institutional theory a philosophical foundation which will provide, amongst other things, a surer underpinning of its critique of ‘new’ (or as Stinchcombe (1997: 2) alleges ‘Durkheimian’) institutionalism in its failure to acknowledge its own value orientation.

As we have seen there are potentially wide variations in the ways in which we might undertake distinctively MacIntyrean organizational analysis, but if the foregoing argument is correct none of these could ignore the “for the sake of” (MacIntyre 1988: 131) relationship in respect of reasons for action. Rational action is always accountable such that answers to “Why did you do so act?” questions (*ibid.*: 131) take the form of a recounting of deliberations (which may have been implicit at the time of action itself) in which the actor moves from a notion of the good to be pursued to a (series of) judgment(s) about which actions best move the agent towards that good. Divorce action from the concept of the good and action is divorced from rationality and hence intelligibility:

“The application of the concept of intelligibility thus presupposes the application of the concept of a good, and a good reason is most adequately specified as a reason for doing something which will be or achieve some good.” (MacIntyre 1986: 75)

Our ability to provide reasons for action is learned, however, and one of the important features of modes of institutionalisation is therefore the extent to which those who inhabit them may learn to become intelligible so that they can offer answers not only to questions such as ‘Why did you do that?’ but also to such questions as ‘Why is the reason you gave for doing that a good reason?’ It is in this latter type of question that the importance of both being able to distinguish between reason-affording arguments and the relevance of different types of context becomes apparent. These abilities are fostered by some and undermined by other institutional arrangements and participation in practices is itself the *sine qua non* for developing the ability to reason adequately.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> There are parallels here with Granovetter’s (1985) notion of “embeddedness”

<sup>23</sup> We have noted briefly in previous work (Moore & Beadle 2006: 380, 384) the relationship of ‘new’ institutional theory to MacIntyrean organization theory, particularly in relation to the environmental precondition for organizational virtue.

<sup>24</sup> MacIntyre’s fullest account of the conditions that are required for our development into independent practical reasoners is contained in *Dependent Rational Animals* (1999a).



Institutions may present agents operating within them with formal statements of purpose, schematics for decision-making and informal routines (some of which we may call cultural) to direct their members in their decision-making and these to varying extents determine both a range of intelligible reasons and intelligible actions. MacIntyre's own work on organizations (particularly 1964, 1977 and 1979a) has focussed on formal decision-making in which utilitarianism dominates such routines as Cost-Benefit Analysis and Job Evaluation. His critiques here as elsewhere (1967: 207-8, 1999b: 325-27) emphasize the reliance of such routines on a series of denials and in particular the denial of reasoning about ends.<sup>25</sup> Managers in such contexts bind their reason within the confines of institutionally determined purposes; borrowing from Hegel, MacIntyre's 1964 paper describes this as "the spiritual zoo" in which managers "live in separate cages and choose not to ask why there are bars or what lies outside them" (1964: 13).<sup>26</sup>

It is not only utilitarian decision-making routines that impact upon organizational agents' reasoning abilities. MacIntyre cites a number of studies emphasizing cultural power vested in authoritative figures and peer groups that disable agents' abilities to report their reasons for action (1986: 72). He notes that none of these studies involved individuals "engaged in or developing the abilities acquired in practices" (*ibid.*: 72), an open invitation for empirical work to be undertaken involving just such individuals.

Distinctively MacIntyrean empirics, holding to a notion of the organization as an essentially moral space, attempts to determine the relationship between reasons for action directed towards the achievement of goods internal and/or external to practices. In one example of such work, a decision to elongate the interval between two halves of a circus performance was determined to have been taken for the sake of optimising the earning potential of the interval despite the damaging consequences of this to the achievement of goods internal to the practice of the circus arts (Beadle & Könyöt 2006: 134). It is not only, however, in the relative weight given to the pursuit of internal and external goods that we can judge the extent to which the practice-institution combination is being held in an appropriate balance.

It is of considerable importance to the virtues that to be moved by appropriate reasons for action is also to be able to give an adequate account of those reasons for action. It is only inasmuch as we are moved to action by the power of the good reasons themselves that we become practitioners whose desires are appropriately ordered. Such practitioners are able not only to practice but also to account for their reasons for action and therefore to become those from whom others can learn within the practice. Contrariwise, not only is it the case that our failures as moral agents are failures to be guided by the right reasons<sup>27</sup> and that our inability to account for our decisions is a sure sign of our failure as moral agents, but also that practice-institution combinations which do not require us to participate in the type of reasoning in which we are mutually accountable themselves fail in one of their principal educative tasks. As we saw above it is only through a certain type of constrained conflict that traditions develop and it is only through engaging with the critical and argumentative

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<sup>25</sup> MacIntyre's analysis of this weakness in institutional decision-making has recently been echoed in his critique of rational decision theory as an account of individual decision-making (2008b).

<sup>26</sup> We discuss both the effects of and responsibility for such compartmentalization in Beadle and Moore (2006).

<sup>27</sup> It is important to note here that it is the narrative ordering of our lives that enables us to choose between practices – i.e. should one engage in the practice of writing an academic paper in preference to collecting one's child from school? In a useful supplement to the discussion in *After Virtue* (2007), MacIntyre 1986 shows how we learn standards of reasoning within practice but must move beyond practice to the narrative ordering of goods in our lives considered as a whole. None of this negates the role of good reasons within practices as those generated by and through the tradition informing the practice and that have application to all practitioners *qua* practitioners. If in the course of setting up rigging on a boat or in a circus tent I have a good reason for checking the ropes, then so does everyone else setting up rigging.

resources of our traditions that individual practitioners can come to know what they are doing.

A central question for MacIntyrean organizational analysis will therefore be the extent to which practice-institution combinations encourage the types of participative enquiry through which we learn how to give, receive and question accounts in ways that extend our understanding of the goods at which we aim and thereby enable us to take better decisions. Sometimes these may be difficult decisions such as withdrawing ourselves from a sports team when we have a minor injury or admitting to error or lack of knowledge. It is in our failures to recognise that we have good reasons as practitioners to be moved by reasons for action which guide the practice, whether through pride, lack of understanding, venality and so on, that we fail. Systems of mutual accountability, in which such reasons are unacceptable within the accounts we routinely give of our actions, are critical institutional protections from the weaknesses and errors of practitioners themselves.

In the first part of this paper we showed how MacIntyre is both a friend and critic of the hermeneutic endeavour. In the second we outlined his schema for understanding organizations and made some arguments for its proximity to the 'old' institutionalism, which led to a discussion of reasons for action. In the third part we attempt to demonstrate how a MacIntyrean analysis would alter organizational analysis conducted within the hermeneutic / institutionalist tradition. The purpose for conducting this exercise would not be served by choosing a poor example of this form of work. Instead, we choose what we consider to be a very good example of such.

### **Part Three. MacIntyrean Organizational Analysis: A reworking of Weick & Sutcliffe on the Bristol RVI**

The 'Bristol Babies' case, as it came to be known, is that of a preventable tragedy. It concerned the conduct of the paediatric cardiac surgery programme at the Bristol Royal Infirmary (BRI), a teaching hospital in the south west of England, between 1981 and 1995. By the end of this period mortality rates rose to become significantly higher than the national average. A number of attempts by outside professionals, whistleblowers and parents to raise concerns about the unit and the hospital were met with denial and a refusal to investigate by senior managers. Eventually, following press and public outcry, the unit's work was suspended and, following a lengthy and detailed public enquiry (Secretary of State for Health 2001), a number of surgeons and senior managers were dismissed from their posts and subsequently removed from their profession ('struck off') by the General Medical Council.<sup>28</sup>

The Inquiry claimed that hospital management operated a "club culture"<sup>29</sup> (thereby using Handy's 1985 nomenclature) in which data that should have been used to establish significant weaknesses in the programme went unused and the status and relationships of senior surgeons, senior managers and bureaucrats at the Department of Health enabled them to go unchallenged. One factor in this was the decision to designate BRI as one of nine Supra Regional Service (SRS) centres largely on grounds of geography rather than clinical expertise (which was identified as being poor in some respects), the physical layout of the hospital (which was detrimental to good care), and the case load (BRI's low case load was considered inadequate to maintain sufficient expertise) (Weick & Sutcliffe 2003: 74-5).

One example of this unchallenging attitude was a Department of Health official who, having received a dossier of evidence detailing poor practice and avoidable deaths among infants,

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<sup>28</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/special\\_report/1998/05/98/the\\_bristol\\_heart\\_babies/115367.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/special_report/1998/05/98/the_bristol_heart_babies/115367.stm); date accessed 21 April 2009.

<sup>29</sup> Point 8 within the summary (Secretary of State for Health 2001).

merely telephoned the Hospital's Chief Executive, received a verbal assurance and took no further action.<sup>30</sup> The combination of surgical practices which had not been updated in line with the development of procedures elsewhere and institutional forces that prevented effective questioning meant that mortality rates (and those of permanent brain injury following procedures) remained steady in the unit despite halving elsewhere over the decade from the mid 1980s. Parents believed that up to 150 children suffered death or serious injury over the period in question.<sup>31</sup>

A further factor in the organisational context was a CEO whose managerial attitude to clinical care was one of 'hands-off', if not downright abdication: "You fix it" (Weick & Sutcliffe 2003: 78). His dismissal of the concerns of principal internal whistleblower, the anaesthetist Dr Stephen Bolsin, was similarly on the grounds that this was "a clinical matter" (*ibid.*: 76). Despite the threat he perceived to his own career, Dr Bolsin, explained his actions in the following terms:

"In the end I just couldn't go on putting those children to sleep, with their parents present in the anaesthetic room, knowing that it was almost certain to be the last time they would see their sons or daughters alive."<sup>32</sup>

Weick & Sutcliffe (2003) interpret the Public Inquiry's 530 page report through an hermeneutic of enactment in which social structures persist as a result of "a cultural mindset about risk, danger, and safety that was anchored by a process of behavioural commitment that shaped interpretation, action and communication" (*ibid.*: 74). They refer to this as "cultural entrapment".

Drawing on the institutional theorists Salancik & Pfeffer's (1978) notion of "behavioural commitment" in which "behaviour becomes an undeniable and unchangeable aspect of the person's world, and when he makes sense of the environment, behaviour is the point on which constructions and interpretations are based" (Weick & Sutcliffe 2003: 77), actors in these positions generate rationalisations which work only because they are regarded as culturally appropriate (*ibid.*: 78). They cite as an example of this the Inquiry's finding that at BRI explanations for poor performance were about case complexity rather than poor practices and these "tenacious justifications" made it harder to learn, discontinue current practice and concentrate on evidence that supported rather than detracted from their position (*ibid.*: 79).

Drawing on Salancik & Pfeffer once more, the work of the surgical teams is characterised by high autonomy, visibility and irrevocability, whose combination required the creation of rationales for practices. When the rationales were put to the test they were found to be unsupportable, but for too long they persisted because "layers of bureaucrats above the surgical unit, people who had some say in the original choice to designate BRI as a center of excellence, find their own judgments in jeopardy. The unintended consequence is that the whole chain of decision makers comes to support an explanation that makes it difficult for an underperforming unit to improve or to stop altogether" (*ibid.*: 80). Behavioural commitments thus entrap cultures through institutional processes of rationalization and protection.

Weick & Sutcliffe draw three lessons from this. First that those at the bottom of organizational hierarchies feel less pressure "to justify and construct acceptable errant reasons for errant actions" (*ibid.*: 80) because they were not involved in the choices that have led to them but, because they are dealing with those most affected, they are under immediate pressure to

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<sup>30</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/1218149.stm>; date accessed: 21 April 2009.

<sup>31</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/special\\_report/1998/05/98/the\\_bristol\\_heart\\_babies/149666.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/special_report/1998/05/98/the_bristol_heart_babies/149666.stm); date accessed 21 April 2009.

<sup>32</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/532006.stm>; date accessed 21 April 2009.

respond on behalf of the institution: "People at the bottom are torn between justification and candor" (*ibid*: 81). Institutional support for candor and learning rather than justification and concealment will have a greater impact amongst those at the bottom of the institution because they are not also tempted to justify their own involvement in prior choices. Second, the professional autonomy of surgeons and CEOs "works against learning" (*ibid*: 81). Justifications become self-perpetuating at higher levels. Third, justificatory interpretation worked as it did due to the combination of autonomy, visibility and irrevocability in the "committing context" (*ibid*: 82) and hence, "Accelerated learning, in this view, is more likely when the committing context itself is weakened" (*ibid*: 82).

They recommend two lessons for hospitals. First that acceptable reasons for action should centre on a notion of learning in which fallibility and vulnerability are acknowledged and second that hospitals should deliberately weaken the "committing context" of choice, visibility and irrevocability so that "people are not forced to justify inadequate performance" (*ibid*: 82). In its place acknowledged interdependence can moderate behavioural commitment to enable problems to be identified, errors acknowledged and decisions changed:

"Thus choice is reframed as a collective responsibility, such that the buck stops everywhere. Publicity is reframed as a collective commitment to provide constructive feedback to one another in order to improve performance. Irrevocability is reframed as a collective responsibility to identify escape routes, contingency plans, and to mentally stimulate potential interventions in order to spot potential traps. When choice, publicity and irrevocability are treated as collective responsibilities necessitated by task interdependence, this spreads responsibility but it does *not* diffuse it ... Dogma precludes learning, and it precludes improvement. This is what happened at BRI and it need not happen again." (*ibid*: 83, emphasis retained)

Weick & Sutcliffe's article is an excellent example of the use of institutional theory informed by hermeneutic commitments, whose focus on the relationship between systems of interpretation and action is (to these authors) persuasive. In respect of institutional processes and their effects a MacIntyrean analysis would differ only in nomenclature. Where Weick & Sutcliffe write of choice, visibility and irrevocability, a MacIntyrean analysis would write of the balance of power in institutional structures and the systems and processes through which decisions are taken. How, then, would a MacIntyrean analysis differ?

First a MacIntyrean analysis would identify the goods internal to the practice (in this case of medicine), what its purpose is held to be in the tradition which constitutes it and thus what good reasons for action must be if they are to serve these goods. This is not just a matter of language, for in the MacIntyrean view hospitals derive their point and purpose from *and only from* the proper practice of medicine. By contrast, point nine of the Synopsis of the Inquiry Report found that "vulnerable children were not a priority" (Secretary of State for Health 2001). What is absent from Weick & Sutcliffe's study, but notably not from the Inquiry report, the submissions of the affected families and the subsequent actions of the General Medical Council, were the ways in which the surgeons themselves failed as practitioners in their ability to reason adequately towards this proper purpose. A further element of a MacIntyrean analysis would have drawn particular attention to the social and co-operative nature of any engagement in practices (the "interdependencies" noted in Weick & Sutcliffe's conclusion (2003: 83)), elements that were missing from the way the two key surgeons behaved in relation to their teams (*ibid*: 75). Attention to these issues would have sent early warning signals that all was not well.

Second a MacIntyrean analysis would draw a sharper distinction between the institution (the hospital) and the practice than Weick & Sutcliffe offer. Whilst agreeing with the examples given of the ways in which particular forms of institutionalisation can undermine learning by corrupting the reasons for action that are legitimate within the practice, a MacIntyrean

analysis would also consider the responsibilities of the institutional managers themselves for not providing systems and processes adequate to protect against poor performance; as noted above, it is partly their responsibility to identify 'best practice', potentially by comparison with other similar units, and this they signally failed to do. A MacIntyrean analysis would also suggest that, just because a particular organization has a good purpose, this does not prevent it from constructing a "mode of institutionalisation" which is less than supportive of organisational virtue. Weick & Sutcliffe's conclusions address ways in which hospitals might create and support such systems, but their purpose is implicit – if we regard organizations as essentially moral spaces then it is clear that the institutional failures they describe were also moral failures exaggerated by an inadequate mode of institutionalisation.

Third the actions of the principal whistleblower, Dr Bolsin, in resisting institutional pressure to conform, cannot be adequately theorised with the resources Weick & Sutcliffe have at their disposal because these neglect the critical role played by individual agency. Equally, the contrasting actions of the CEO in abandoning any responsibility for the core practice are highlighted by a MacIntyrean account. Such an account, within which individual virtue and vice always merits consideration, and in which the "standards of excellence" of the practice and their systematic extension are always to the fore, is better equipped to provide an adequate explanation. In asking the "for the sake of what?" questions of these two practitioners in relation to their reasons for action, it would identify and encourage the virtue inherent in Dr Bolsin's actions and his implicit concern for the internal goods of the practice, and it would identify and discourage the "for the sake of the institution" approach of the CEO in which short-term expediency was privileged over a proper concern for the core practice.

Fourth a MacIntyrean analysis would draw attention to the environmental setting. The decision to designate BRI as a SRS centre despite its lack of expertise, the failure then to put in place systems to monitor and support its development, and the implication of bureaucrats above the surgical unit in the unit's explanations, all suggest that the environment was not conducive to organisational virtue. A MacIntyrean analysis would have identified the moral hazard inherent in the organizational environment and, again, sent warning signals much earlier in the saga.

It is the use of distinctively moral and evaluative language that separates such analysis from the contemporary space of academic discourse in which technicist neutrality is at home. A MacIntyrean analysis cannot but attempt to bridge and thus critique the disciplinary boundaries between organizational analysis and organizational ethics. The former without the latter is devoid of what Stinchcombe calls "guts"; the latter without the former is reduced to wishful thinking. McMylor (2001: 23) argued that MacIntyre's neglect by sociologists reflected his opposition to the dominant liberal assumptions of their practice, including the fact/value distinction and the academic authorial voice. The same argument could be made of much organization theory. What then are the prospects for a distinctively MacIntyrean organization theory?

#### **Part Four. Conclusion – An Agenda for MacIntyrean Organization Theory**

In Part One of this paper we outlined both the family resemblance and distinctiveness of MacIntyre's project from that of philosophical hermeneutics. In Part Two we provided the outline of a distinctively MacIntyrean organization theory and suggested resemblances to the tradition of 'old' institutional theory. In Part Three we illustrated both these resemblances and distinctions through the example of Weick & Sutcliffe's study of the Bristol Babies case. Does any of this matter, however? Is there any evidence that MacIntyre's framework is being used by organizational scholars and what does MacIntyrean scholarship have to do to demonstrate its potential?

What we do not lack is critical engagement with MacIntyre's ideas in the literature. In organization theory a special edition of *Organization* on MacIntyre's work appeared in 1995 (Vol. 2:2) and in 2006 a special edition of *Organization Studies* on organizations and virtue (Vol 27:3) contained significant consideration of his work. Within business ethics debate has been joined around MacIntyre and markets (Horvath 1995, Dobson 1996, 1997, Wicks 1996, 1997, Dawson & Bartholomew 2003, Keat 2000, 2008a, 2008b), in management studies the Weberian character of MacIntyre's understanding of the manager has received attention (Anthony 1986, Mangham 1995, Brewer 1997, Du Gay 1998, Tester 2000, Beadle 2002, Holt 2006, Moore 2005b, 2008) and a variety of professional literatures have witnessed cases being made for their elevation to the status of 'practice' (Lambeth 1990 for journalism, Sellman 2000 for nursing, Leeper & Leeper 2001 for public relations). Finally Beadle & Moore have debated whether business itself can be considered a practice (Moore 2005a, Beadle 2008b).

What is more encouraging in our view, (and more importantly MacIntyre's (2008a)), is the development of empirical applications of his work (see Part 1.3 above for examples). Throughout this paper we have indicated a wide range of empirical questions that arise and through which his particular blend of hermeneutics, tradition and ethics can be realised. But of all of these possibilities, where might a prioritised agenda for MacIntyrean research lie? We may be able to construct a range of classificatory schema through which to describe such work in terms of methods, subjects (critical or appreciative), storytelling genres, attempts to exemplify the virtues and attempts to test the relationships associated with them and so on, but any attempt to prioritise between categories would be fruitless because it would either rest on methodological commitments that undermine the breadth of work that can be legitimately undertaken under his auspices or it would presume a relationship between genre and quality that is itself unsustainable.

In contrast, MacIntyre has suggested that what is important about such studies is their "directedness" (2008a: 6); the work must be judged by its purposes in the same way as its objects are to be judged. The principal arbiter of directedness is the extent to which we can draw lessons for practice (*ibid.*: 6). We cannot anticipate the success of our endeavours but the adoption of a MacIntyrean framework would fall hopelessly into the void of self-contradiction without an awareness of its own purpose. This then becomes the *sine qua non* of distinctively MacIntyrean research.

Amongst the possibilities that this rejects is any suggestion that a paper such as this, or empirical work supporting MacIntyre's contentions, will convince those whose work is framed by other traditions. But such is not its purpose. This observation is pertinent because the condition of organization studies reflects closely the conditions whose critique is the object of *After Virtue*. This is of a contemporary social order in which distinctively moral utterance exhibits a cleavage between meaning and use such that its characterisation as emotivism appears warranted. Debate is rationally interminable, viewpoints abound, reason as conceived and practiced is incapable of resolving any substantive matter and yet at the same time the standards to which appeal is made are held to be independent of those by whom appeal is made. In organization theory we need look no further than our text books, journals or even this volume to witness the same. The most convincing texts are those that present difference most cogently.

In seeking to overcome, rather than to accept or enjoy this kaleidoscope (Tsoukas & Cummings 1997), MacIntyre writes a particular genre of history, one which reconstructs the past to explain the fragmentation of the present. To apply such methods to organization studies would require a similar historic reconstruction, of the type which engaged the mind of

that great early institution theorist Tom Burns in the final years of his life.<sup>33</sup> In the absence of such an undertaking, our purpose in this paper has been to invite readers unfamiliar with MacIntyre to seek him out. Inasmuch as our representations of his work have failed to meet the standards and meanings of the original, as they surely have, the error is ours, but inasmuch as this paper encourages readers to consider or reconsider the work of Alasdair MacIntyre himself, the credit is his.

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<sup>33</sup> Tom Burns is the organizational scholar to whom MacIntyre makes most frequent reference (e.g. 2007: 106) The manuscript of this unfinished work, which also references MacIntyre, can be found at <http://www.tomburns.org.uk/manuscript.html>.

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